James Phelan, " Progression, vitesse et jugement dans "Das Urteil" ou Ce que Kafka et une théorie rhétorique du récit peuvent faire l'un pour l'autre", traduit de l'anglais (États-Unis) par Marie Ladame-Buschini et Sylvie Patron

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Progression, Speed, and Judgment in "Das Urteil"; Or What Kafka and a Rhetorical Theory of Narrative Can Do for Each Other

This essay seeks to open up some two-way traffic between Kafka the narrative artist and the rhetorical theory of narrative. More specifically, I seek to identify the narrative logic underlying what I take to be the irreducible strangeness of Kafka's "Das Urteil" (1916) and then to use the results to expand the explanatory power of rhetorical theory. I choose "Das Urteil" as my case study for three reasons. First, although I do not view the story as representing the quintessence of Kafka's narrative practice, it is a significant milestone in his career. "Das Urteil" is widely acknowledged to be, in Frederick Karl's words, "the first of [Kafka's] mature works" (434), and Kafka himself regarded the eight-hour writing session on the night of September 22-23, 1912 that ended with his completion of the story as one of the formative experiences in his development as a writer. Second, the story has received extensive, insightful comments from critics, thus relieving me of the burden of producing an original reading of the story and allowing me to focus on explaining the underlying sources of its strangeness, which I also take to be a source of its power. In other words, like many other critics, I want to respect and hold onto the story's strangeness rather than trying to master it—even as I offer an account of its underlying logic. Third, in some recent work, I have been examining the interconnections between the concepts of progression and judgment, and Kafka's story provides an especially good location from which to extend and test that work. With respect to progression, "Das Urteil" opens up issues about how we determine narrative speed and about the nature of surprise endings. With respect to judgment, "Das Urteil" invites a consideration of the connection between the complexities of both interpretive and ethical judgments of the characters and their actions and the ethics of Kafka's storytelling itself. Let

me, then, start down my two-way highway—or winding country road—by saying more about the rhetorical approach to narrative.

The rhetorical approach conceives of narrative as a purposive communicative act. In this view, narrative is not just a representation of events, a fusion of story and discourse, but is also itself an event—one in which someone is doing something with a representation of events, and that doing something involves a design on an audience. In this way, the approach is interested in both the consciousness designing the communicative act, the implied author, and his or her intended or authorial audience. The approach also recognizes that the concept of an authorial audience is a hypothetical ideal, that, in other words, individual readers do not always conform to an author's intended audience (see Rabinowitz).[1] But the rhetorical critic is interested in how actual readers can become members of the authorial audience. Thus, when I use the first-person plural pronoun here to describe how Kafka's audience responds to the story, I will be referring to Kafka's authorial audience.

More formally, the rhetorical theorist defines narrative as somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened. The concept of narrative progression attends to the two main participants in the rhetorical action—the somebody who tells and the somebody else who is told—and to the means by which they communicate. From this perspective, narrative is a double-layered phenomenon involving both a dynamics of character, event, and telling and a dynamics of audience response. The

[1] The concept of the authorial audience has some similarities with Iser's concept of the implied reader, but the two concepts are far from interchangeable, and that disparity points to a larger difference between the rhetorical approach and Iser's phenomenological approach. The concepts are similar because they both refer to hypothetical audiences that are assumed or implied by the text. But the concepts are ultimately distinct because they are connected to different accounts of the activity of reading. For Iser, the main activity of reading consists in filling in the gaps that literary texts inevitably contain, with actual readers filling in those gaps in different ways. For the rhetorical theorist, the main activity of reading is responding to the text as it has been designed by its implied author. From the rhetorical perspective, Iser is describing only one kind of textual design (namely, one with gaps that are designed to be filled in different ways). Rhetorical theory posits that some gaps are designed to be closed in a determinate way, that some are designed to be closed in a variety of ways, and that still others are designed to resist our capacity to fill them in. Indeed, I shall argue that "Das Urteil" has a central gap of this last kind.

phrase "somebody telling ... that something happened" gets at the first layer: narrative involves the report of a sequence of related events during which the characters and/or their situations undergo some *change*. As I have discussed elsewhere,[2] the report of that change typically proceeds through the introduction, complication, and resolution (in whole or in part) of unstable situations within, between, or among the characters. These dynamics of instability may be accompanied by a dynamics of tension in the telling—unstable relations among authors, narrators, and audiences—and the interaction of the two sets of dynamics, as in narratives that employ unreliable narration, may have significant consequences for our understanding of the "something that happened."

Narrative judgments are crucial components of the second layer of progression. The dynamics of audience response depend upon two main readerly activities: observing and judging. (In this respect, narrative is different from lyric, which invites us to participate in rather than judge a speaker's emotions or attitudes.) As observers, we perceive the characters of the narrative as both external to ourselves and as distinct from their implied authors. Consequently, we make interpretive and ethical judgments about them, their situations, and their choices. Furthermore, our interpretive and ethical judgments are integral to our emotional responses as well as to our desires concerning future events. In addition, this trajectory of judgment and response is intertwined with another kind of judgment we make, an aesthetic judgment about the overall quality of our experience, both as it is happening and once it is complete. Finally, because readerly dynamics involve interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic judgments that develop over time, and thus can themselves be revised, the readerly side of progression often involves a process of configuration and reconfiguration, that is, a process of forming a hypothesis about the trajectory of the narrative and how its parts contribute to that trajectory and then revising that hypothesis in light of new judgments.

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[2] See *Experiencing Fiction*, pp. 15-22, pp. 151-54, and passim. For additional background, see *Reading People*, especially the Introduction and Chapter 4,

In sum, then, from the rhetorical perspective narrative involves the interaction of two kinds of change over time: that experienced by the characters and that experienced by the audience in its developing responses to the characters' changes. Moreover, these two layers of progression, the textual dynamics rooted in instabilities and tensions, and the readerly dynamics rooted in observation and judgment, are reciprocally influential. As a moment's reflection on narratives with surprise endings such as "Das Urteil" indicates, even as the audience's trajectory through the progression depends upon textual dynamics, the author constructs those dynamics with one eye on how they will affect the reader. Analyzing the interactions between progression and judgments allows one to develop an understanding of a narrative's underlying logic and of its rhetorical purposes because such analysis reveals (a) the principles upon which the author constructs the narrative's unfolding in time and (b) the interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic underpinnings of its audience's responses.[3]

Before I turn to Kafka's story, I want to touch on three other consequences of this rhetorical conception of narrative. (1) Since judgment is itself such a necessary part of human life, narratives often represent characters making judgments. Consequently, the readerly dynamics of progression often lead us to judge characters' judgments. "Das Urteil" often puts us in this position. (2) Just as there is an ethics of the told, that is, an ethics that applies to the characters and their interactions, there is also an ethics of the telling, that is, an ethical dimension to the interactions among authors, narrators, and audiences. (3) The system of instabilities and tensions in combination with characterization and narrative technique helps define the relation among three broad components of readerly interest that I call the mimetic, the thematic, and the synthetic. The mimetic component involves our interest in the characters and events as what Aristotle called "imitation"; the thematic involves our interest in the characters and events as a means to explore ideas or beliefs about the world; and the synthetic

[3] For a fuller discussion and demonstration of these points see *Experiencing Fiction.*

involves our interest in characters and events as artificial constructions of an authorial design. Different narratives will establish different relations among these three components as they pursue their different purposes. The larger point here is that the rhetorical approach does not assume, like much other criticism does, that the goal of interpretation is to establish thematic meaning. Instead, it is interested in the thematic as one of the components of readerly interest and one of the possible purposes of narrative as a rhetorical action. In addition, by displacing thematic interpretation from the center of the critical enterprise and focusing on progression, judgment, and the underlying logic of narrative, the rhetorical approach can, in a case such as "Das Urteil," propose an explanation of why the narrative is amenable to so many thematic interpretations. [4]

Progression, Speed, and Judgment in "Das Urteil"

Since there has been so much good commentary on the story, I will work from a helpful summary by Henry Sussman of what that commentary has established and suggest how a rhetorical approach can extend and refine this baseline understanding. In a section on "The Aesthetics of Confusion" within a broader essay on Kafka's aesthetics, Sussman writes that "Onto Georg Bendemann's best-case scenario of his role in his family, his forthcoming marriage, his business success, and his empathy for his friend, Kafka seamlessly splices, within the continuity of the narrative, his father's very different account of the events and arenas in Georg's life. The 'hinge' or 'graft' between the counternarratives is a fulcrum for confusion existing at least *in potentia* for the duration of Kafka's fiction" (135). From the perspective of rhetorical theory, Sussman's overview of the story is fine as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. Indeed, because it posits a standoff between Georg's best-case scenario and Herr Bendemann's counternarrative, it ends up flattening the story out, sacrificing its strangeness to an account of confusion as unresolvable ambiguity. Focusing on

[4] For a fuller discussion of the rhetorical approach, see *Reading People*, *Narrative as Rhetoric*, *Living to Tell about It* and *Experiencing Fiction*.

progression and judgment leads to a revision of Sussman's account that seeks to preserve strangeness in three main ways: (a) by giving the speed of the narrative its due; (b) by distinguishing more clearly between what is determinate in the story and what remains in an interpretive gap; and (c) by accounting for the consequences of that gap for our overall experience of the story. The results of this analysis will lead in turn to a consideration, first, of the traffic going the other way—that is, of how Kafka's story complicates some ideas of rhetorical theory—and then, second, of the ethics of Kafka's telling.

Looking globally at the progression of "Das Urteil," we can discern three recognizably distinct stages to it. Stage one consists of Georg Bendemann sitting at his writing desk and reflecting on his relation with the friend to whom he has just written a letter. Stage two consists of Georg's conflictual conversation with his father, culminating in his father's condemning him to death by drowning. Stage three consists of Georg's acceptance of and immediate capitulation to his father's judgment. Thus, we move from a stage where Georg is alone, to one where he interacts with his father, and then back to one where he is alone. In addition to highlighting this movement, identifying the three stages also helps us recognize the relation between the story's strangeness and its narrative speed, and indeed looking at that relation can help lead us to a richer understanding of narrative speed from a rhetorical perspective. Identifying the three stages of "Das Urteil" helps us see that it begins at a leisurely pace in stage one, rapidly accelerates in stages two and three, and then slows down again in the final sentences. It will be helpful to sketch this movement, first in broad terms so that we can grasp the overall pattern, and then to move to a closer analysis of its details. That closer analysis will benefit from an engagement with Jan Baetens and Katherine Hume's recent theoretical discussion of narrative speed.

My initial description of the story's speed is more than impressionistic because it is based on the interaction of textual and readerly dynamics in each of the stages. The first stage

is leisurely in spite of its revealing two instabilities, because the first, about Georg's relation to his friend, appears to get resolved within this first stage, and because the second, a more significant one, involving dissonance between Georg's ethical character and his own understanding of that ethical character, does not get complicated until stage two.

Furthermore, the interpretive and ethical judgments evolve slowly, in part as a result of Kafka's handling of temporality in the first stage. We meet Georg after he has just finished his letter, and after reading about a third of the story we find, through the narrator's statement, that he has been sitting at the desk for an indefinitely long time. In the space between the two statements describing Georg at his desk, Kafka's narrator does not call attention to time passing in the narrative NOW, but rather engages in a narration about the past, reviewing Georg's perceptions of his friend, his own contrasting situation, and the contents of the letter itself. While this material introduces the dissonance between Georg's judgment of himself and our judgment of him, the movement to the past rather than significantly forward in the narrative NOW works as a brake on the story's pace. Kafka's strategy allows for the gradual evolution of our judgments about Georg even as it defers any complication of the instability until the review of the past is complete.

Once Georg goes to talk with his father, however, the pace of the narrative accelerates rapidly because (1) the instabilities get complicated with each line of dialogue and (2) each new complication requires new interpretive and ethical judgments. As a result, Kafka's authorial audience is likely to have difficulty handling the accelerated pace. At the end of the second stage, the speed shifts into yet a higher gear, as the progression takes a sharp and sudden turn to its climax in Herr Bendemann's judgment of Georg. The breakneck pace continues as the story hurtles on to the third stage, Georg's surprising acceptance of the judgment. Just as important, when Herr Bendemann delivers his judgment at the end of stage two, the authorial audience's struggle to keep up with the necessary interpretive and ethical

judgments can meet with only partial success because Kafka builds into that moment a major interpretive gap. Consequently, we follow Georg in his headlong rush to the river with only partial comprehension of the reasons for his behavior, something that further contributes to the story's speed: events are happening faster than we can comprehend them.

Once Georg is on the verge of drowning himself, Kafka slows the pace again by focusing on his last actions and last words, allowing the audience to take in the deliberateness of Georg's act. This slowing down does not allow us to close the interpretive gap but instead it emphasizes the radical change the story has represented and the strangeness associated with that change. Among other things, the final sentence of the story, "In diesem Augenblick ging über die Brücke ein geradezu unendlicher Verkehr" (52) ("At that moment the traffic going over the bridge was nothing short of infinite"; 12), in introducing for the first time a narrative perspective other than Georg's, underlines that strangeness by way of contrast between what has just happened and the everyday quality of what it describes.

In light of this general sketch of the story's progression, I identify much of its story's power and strangeness as stemming from its combining shifts in speed with the unfillable gap at the end of stage two and the beginning of stage three. If the claim holds up, then Kafka has discovered something remarkable: a way to make a significant interpretive gap surrounding the climax of a narrative enhance rather than detract from an audience's interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic experience. In other words, though the climactic events do not finally yield to our efforts to comprehend them, their recalcitrance enhances the story's power. I call this kind of recalcitrance "textual stubbornness," and I will have more to say about it as the analysis proceeds. Let us turn now to a longer—and slower—look at the story's progression.

Because Kafka uses analepsis so extensively in stage one, a major function of Georg's eight paragraphs of reflections is exposition, and that exposition reveals him, according to his own judgments, to be making his way in the world very well indeed. Although his mother

died two years previously, he has become the dominant force in the increasingly successful family business, and he has recently become engaged to Frieda Brandenfeld, "einem Mädchen aus wohlhabender Familie" (1) ("a young woman from a well-to-do family"; 5). Indeed, the only apparent problem in Georg's life that emerges from these reflections is his inability to speak openly and honestly to his childhood friend. But Georg himself, in order to please Frieda, decides to write to the friend, and thus, as noted above, that instability appears to get resolved.

Nevertheless, Kafka's handling of the narration brilliantly reveals that underneath this superficial instability is a more substantial one, involving Georg's relation to himself. As many critics have pointed out, Kafka uses Georg's perspective to show that while Georg appears to make reasonable judgments about the difference between his situation and that of his friend, those judgments are ultimately self-serving. John M. Ellis offers a perceptive summary of this effect: "the superficial impression of the breadth of [Georg's] human sympathy for his friend is overshadowed by a contrary impression of narrowness in Georg's judgments of value, for judgments of his friend's life are made rigidly on the basis of Georg's values" (78). Ellis's subsequent general summary is over the top, but it effectively captures both the instability within Georg and the discrepancy between his self judgments and those Kafka guides his audience to make. "There is, after all, something destructive in Georg's 'considerateness' toward his friend; it seems to provide the opportunity for an orgy of denigration of him, a very full series of imaginings of his helplessness, wretchedness and even disgrace which are very flattering to Georg" (79).[5]

This dimension of the first stage of the progression becomes more prominent when we reflect on its revelations about Georg's investment in this correspondence. He speaks to

[5] For additional—and very insightful—commentary on Ellis's reading, see Pascal ~~pp.~~ (27-31). More generally, Pascal is a very fine reader of Kafka, and his larger conclusion about "Das Urteil," though arrived at via a different route, is similar to mine: the story leaves us with "a baffling and painful puzzle" (30).

Frieda about their "besondere Korespondenzverhältnis" (1), their "special relationship of correspondence between them"; 5), when all the evidence is that their correspondence in recent years has been anything but special. Georg writes only about "bedeutungslose Vorfälle" (42) ("insignificant events"; 5), while his friend expressed his sympathy about the death of Georg's mother "mit Trockenheit" (1) ("dryness"; 4). More significantly, after finishing the letter, Georg sits at his desk lost in thought for a long time. We infer that the correspondence is fulfilling some purpose for Georg beyond the maintenance of the friendship itself, and that purpose is the shoring up of his own self-esteem as he is poised to take his next step into adulthood with his marriage to Frieda. Thus, as we come to the end of the first stage of the progression, Kafka opens up a substantial distance between Georg's interpretive and ethical judgments and those of his authorial audience.

As the progression moves into the second stage and picks up speed, Kafka guides us to see that Georg's approach to his father is similar to his way of thinking about his friend. That is, Kafka shows Georg to be acting in a way that he regards as showing legitimate concern for his father but allows us to see that Georg is ultimately self-serving and condescending. Here, too, Georg's approach initially appears to serve him well, as he blunts his father's skepticism about the existence of his friend by saying that his father is much more important and by helping him get undressed and then carrying him to the bed and covering him up. However, once Herr Bendemann rises from the bed and escalates his verbal assault on Georg, a new element enters the progression. Georg loses not only the upperhand in the conflict but also full control over his own mind. After his father makes his strongest accusations, namely, that because Frieda lifted her skirts, Georg decided to betray his friend, profane his mother's memory, and put his father in bed, the narrator reports: "Vor einer langen Weile hatte er sich fest entschlossen, alles vollkommen genau zu beobachten, damit er nicht irgendwie auf Umwegen, von hinten her, von oben herab überrascht werden könne. Jetzt erinnerte er sich

wieder an den längst vergesssenen Entschluβ und vergaβ in" (50) ("A long time ago he had firmly decided to observe everything very exactly so as to avoid being taken by surprise in some devious way, from behind or from above. Now he remembered that long forgotten decision once again and forgot it"; 10). This pattern of a disparity between Georg's intentions and his actual agency continues, as he blurts out his insult of his father—"Komödiant!" (50) ("Play actor!"; 10)—and as his efforts to mock his father ironically turn into a confirmation of his father's accusations.

In the authorial audience, we are able to make two related interpretive judgments. First, as Herr Bendemann attacks Georg's conception of his relationship with his friend, Georg begins to lose the sense of self shored up by that conception. Second, as this sense of self gets broken down, Georg begins to feel guilty, though the exact nature and extent of that guilt is not yet clear. Significantly, just before Herr Bendemann's judgment, Georg accuses his father of lying in wait for him ("Du hast mir also aufgelauert!" [52] ["And so you've been lying in ambush for me!"; 12]), but the accusation implicitly reveals both his powerlessness and his guilt. Before I consider our ethical judgments of Georg here, it will be helpful to consider our interpretive and ethical judgments of Herr Bendemann—and his judgments.

Kafka claimed that he was thinking of Freud in writing the story, and indeed much of the father-son dynamic can be explained as an Oedipal struggle (see, for example, Hughes). But from the rhetorical perspective what is more significant is that, even as Kafka gradually increases our distance from Georg's interpretive and ethical judgments, he keeps us even more distant from most of Herr Bendemann's. Once Herr Bendemann stands on the bed and goes on the attack, he reveals himself to be not a loving but a jealous and vengeful father. In addition, as Russell Berman perceptively points out, Herr Bendemman contradicts himself. He contends, first, that Georg has no friend in St. Petersburg and then later that Georg and the friend have been in constant correspondence. Herr Bendemann attacks Georg both for

wanting to marry and for delaying the marriage. Finally, he berates Georg for both his childishness and his ambitions with the business and with his marriage. The resulting interpretive and ethical distance between Herr Bendemann and Kafka's audience is compounded by Kafka's restricting the focalization to Georg, so that we never see Herr Bendemann from the inside. At the same time, Kafka effectively uses the dialogue to show that Herr Bendemann does have what Sussman calls a counternarrative to Georg's account of his life and to suggest that two of his motives are to rebel against Georg's neglect of him and to shake Georg out of his complacent self-satisfaction.

When we get to Herr Bendemann's ultimate judgment of Georg, Kafka does not give us enough guidance to make a clear interpretive judgment of Herr Bendemann's motives or of its basis in Georg's behavior. Why should this father, who claims to love his son, condemn that son to death? Not even the accusations the father makes warrant such a harsh judgment. The psychoanalytic explanation, namely that Herr Bendemann is a version of Laius striking back against Oedipus, strikes me as insufficiently responsive not only to the strangeness of the story but also to the particular form that the striking back takes. From Herr Bendemann's/Laius's perspective, wouldn't it be too easy for Georg/Oedipus to reject the judgment? Is there some other knowledge that either Herr Bendemann or Georg has that we don't that makes the judgment appropriate? Why the judgment, and then why the acceptance of it? These questions hover over this moment in the progression, and because they remain unanswerable, Kafka introduces a permanent gap in the progression.

Let me clarify the claim I am making about the nature of this interpretive gap and thus clarify what I mean by textual stubbornness. This gap is significantly different, for example, from the one that exists regarding Herr Bendemann's fate after he delivers the judgment. That gap—specifically, whether Georg's hearing him crash onto the bed is a sign of temporary collapse or of death—is an issue about whether one event or another occurs in the fabula, and

it is a gap that functions to underline the compulsion Georg feels to act on his father's judgment. Georg hears the crash but is too intent on taking his own life even to wonder what the crash signifies. In other words, Kafka's decision to leave this gap in the textual dynamics contributes to the effectiveness of our interpretive and ethical judgments of Georg and thus to the story's progression as a whole. The gap is not an instance of stubbornness because we can adequately interpret it: there are only two possibilities, and though they are substantially different, their consequences for our understanding of the protagonist's action are not. By contrast, the gap surrounding Herr Bendemann's judgment is not a gap in the fabula—the event occurs—but a gap in readerly dynamics that leaves us in a position of being unable to fully interpret the judgment, meaning, in turn, that we cannot make a clear ethical judgment of it, of Herr Bendemann, or of Georg in his accepting of it. This gap is an instance of stubbornness because we cannot comprehend the event within the logic of the narrative to this point, and yet the event remains crucial to the overall progression.

One way in which Kafka maintains stubbornness is to block a conventional judgment that Georg is overreacting to his father's condemnation by showing Georg regaining his agency, even as the pace of the progression slows. Although, as Ronald Speirs has noted, Georg is initially driven out of the house by an impersonal force referred to only by *es* (it), once he is hanging from the bridge, his agency returns. Georg thinks about when he should drop, and he utters his declaration of love for both of his parents. The slower pace, the return of Georg's agency, the affirmation of his love for his parents—all these elements underline the point that he accepts the judgment, and that conscious acceptance unsettles our ethical judgment of Georg. We can conclude neither that he should nor should not have accepted the father's judgment, even as the story puts pressure on us to judge Georg's decision.

At the same time, the interpretive gap and Georg's acceptance of his father's judgment has another significant effect on the progression, specifically on the relation between its

mimetic component, on the one hand, and its thematic and synthetic components, on the other. Although John Ellis rightly points out that even the first paragraph of the story does not fully conform to the tenets of straight realism, the dominant signals of the first stage of the progression are those that activate our interest in its mimetic component, and the story rewards our efforts to read such things as the psychology of the characters in mimetic terms. But one consequence of the textual stubbornness is to move the story from a straight mimetic account to one in which the thematic and the synthetic become more prominent. The gap encourages us to read the story as a parable rather than a psychological study. In such readings, Georg and Herr Bendemann function as types whose interactions we can explain less by reference to plausible psychological behavior of autonomous individuals than by reference to Kafka's working out of the relations among certain ideas. But it is important to see that while the move to a greater emphasis on the thematic and the synthetic encourages such readings, it does not resolve the story's textual stubbornness. Instead, it is the textual stubbornness itself that allows for the proliferation of such readings. "Das Urteil" is a parable of guilt that includes elements of father-son struggles going back to Oedipus. It is a story about the power of patriarchy, about both the necessity and the inevitable imperfections of judgment. And it is many other things as well. These thematic readings can be very insightful, and, indeed, I have learned from many of them. But to the extent that they claim to close the interpretive gap at the climax of the story, they overreach. Even if we say that "Das Urteil" belongs to the genre of the parable and that parables are often enigmatic, we cannot convert the stubbornness of Kafka's story into a more conventional textual difficulty because the location of the unbridgeable gap at the climax of the story moves it beyond the enigmatic to the inscrutable. All of these considerations have consequences for our aesthetic judgments of the story, but I will defer that discussion until after I look at the traffic going in the other direction, that is, between "Das Urteil" and the rhetorical theory of narrative.

What Kafka Can Do for Rhetorical Theory

Traffic in this direction stops at four stations: at the first, a principle of rhetorical theory gets reinforced; at the second, rhetorical theory offers some new generalizations about narrative speed; at the third, rhetorical theory learns something new about progressions with surprise endings; and at the fourth, rhetorical theory adds to its understanding of textual stubbornness. The principle at the first station is that rhetorical theory wants to work in an a posteriori fashion. Although, as the essay to this point indicates, the theory has constructed a large warehouse of terms and concepts (and I have given you just a small sample), it regards them not as forming preset molds into which narratives will inevitably fit—or must be made to fit—but rather as available tools for opening up the workings of individual narratives. "Das Urteil" reinforces this lesson because it does not fit any predetermined rhetorical mode, and, indeed, the challenge it presents to the rhetorical critic is to uncover its logic while also preserving its strangeness.

At the same time, rhetorical theory is not averse to offering generalizations after it has done its a posteriori work on a number of narratives. To eschew generalization altogether is, in effect, to be anti-theoretical. It is also to suggest that what one learns from the analysis of one narrative cannot apply to the analysis of another. The delicate matter of course is to engage in appropriate generalization, to develop theoretical conclusions that help us work on new narratives without leading us to take the High Priori Road. I shall keep this point in mind as I move on to the next three stations on this side of the road.

Station two. Attending to speed in "Das Urteil" helps rhetorical theory extend the recent work of Jan Baetens and Katherine Hume, who have offered a helpful overview of narrative speed as involving both textual and readerly components. On the textual side, Baetens and Hume identify speed effects as occurring at the story level (mentions and descriptions of speed), at the discourse level (effects fall along a spectrum with elliptical

syntax near one end and pauses in the narration of events in favor of description at the other),[6] and at the narration level (by which they mean performances of speed in the typography or in the oral delivery of the text). On the readerly side, they work with the distinctions among implied reader (authorial audience in rhetorical theory), narratee, and empirical reader (flesh and blood reader in rhetorical theory). Baetens and Hume note that the first two audiences are encoded in the text while the third operates independently of textual encoding. They also make the astute observation that encoded speed is "never just determined by what is being read here and now, but also by what has just been read and by what one has been expecting to read immediately afterwards" (352). In this sense, as Baetens and Hume point out, speed is connected to the larger concept of textual rhythm.

Rhetorical theory is primarily interested in encoded speed, and it endorses Baetens and Hume's point about the relation between speed and rhythm. But as the analysis of "Das Urteil" suggests, rhetorical theory can offer greater precision about the interaction between textual and readerly components of speed through its attention to the dynamics of progression and especially the role of interpretive and ethical judgments—and the strategic placement of an interpretive gap. In other words, what Kafka's story teaches us is that a narrative can accelerate its pace, not simply by increasing the pace of the complication of instabilities, but also by accompanying that acceleration with an increasing number of interpretive and ethical judgments—and with a requirement that the audience jump over a space in which one would normally expect to make such judgments. Indeed, as I have indicated above, this combination of accelerated judgments with the strategic gap seems to me central to both the story's power and its strangeness.

Station three. In my discussion of Edith Wharton's "Roman Fever" (1934) in Chatper Four of *Experiencing Fiction*, I have made what I regarded as an appropriate generalization

[6] Baetens and Hume actually locate pauses for description at the story level, but that seems counterintuitive to me.

by proposing that effective surprise endings meet three conditions. The surprise must (1) lead to a plausible reconfiguration of the narrative, (2) be prepared for, that is, in retrospect, be part of a recognizable pattern, and (3) in some way enhance the overall effect of the narrative. Narratives in which the surprise depends upon characters acting in accord with traits that they have not previously exhibited, narratives that include absolutely no clues to the surprise (for example, many versions of the "it was only a dream" ending), and narratives in which the surprise, though congruent and prepared for, is an elaborate contrivance rather than a necessary part of a larger purpose—all either fall flat or come across as ethical or aesthetic cheats.

Wharton's "Roman Fever" meets all of these conditions with consummate skill. The story ends with Grace Ansley's surprising revelation to her rival Alida Slade that the father of Grace's admirable daughter Barbara is not her husband, but Alida's. The revelation causes both Alida and Wharton's audience to reconfigure their understanding of what happened in Rome twenty-five years previously when Alida developed a scheme to have Grace contract tuberculosis and so be unavailable as a possible love interest for her future husband. Alida's scheme is to forge Delphin's signature to a note asking Grace to meet him after dark in the Colosseum. Thus, it is only with this final revelation that Alida realizes how the scheme brought about the tryst that led to Grace's conception of Barbara. The surprise fits with the previous progression because it does not contradict but rather rounds out our understanding of Grace's character, and it effectively concludes their conversation that has in some way been a re-enactment of the rivalry that they engaged in twenty-five years previously. The surprise has been prepared for in numerous ways, including the disclosure of seemingly incidental information about Barbara and the narrator calling attention to odd emphases or silences in Grace's half of the conversation. And the surprise enhances the story by showing how its present-tense conversation not only reenacts the rivalry but also concludes it in a similar way:

Alida has been trying to establish her superiority over Grace only to discover once again that Grace has gotten the better of her.

Kafka's "Das Urteil" teaches rhetorical theory something new, because its surprise ending works in a remarkably different way, but no less effectively. The stubbornness associated with the moment of judgment means both that the surprise is not fully congruent with the rest of the progression and that it is not prepared for in the way that the surprise of "Roman Fever" is. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the surprise significantly enhances the story's strange power and appeal. What "Das Urteil" teaches, then, is that the neat reversals and coherent reconfigurations that characterize "Roman Fever," Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890), Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), and other effective stories with surprising endings are not an absolute necessity for all narratives built on the principle of surprise. To put the lesson in more positive terms, "Das Urteil" shows that a limited stubbornness, even—or better, especially—when associated with a climactic moment in the progression can significantly enhance the power of the story, even as it points to a different kind of purpose from the ones we find in the stories that meet my three conditions. Rather than getting its power from a tighter and deeper understanding of the actions we have just read about, Kafka's story gets its power by keeping things open and broadening our explorations into the ethical and psychological dynamics—and thematic meanings—of the events we have just read about. In other words, the value added by the surprise is not that it takes us deeper into the mimetic situation, but rather that it invites us to relate the story to an ever widening range of issues and contexts.

Station four. The lesson here, then, is about stubbornness itself. In my previous explorations of this phenomenon, I have focused on the recalcitrance involved in our adequate interpretation of characters such as Toni Morrison's Beloved in *Beloved* (1987), John Fowles's Sarah Woodruff in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), and Jim in Conrad's

Lord Jim (1900). In an analysis of Robert Frost's "Home Burial" (1916) in *Experiencing Fiction*, I have also considered the textual stubbornness that results when an author does not take sides in an argument between two sympathetic characters who embrace opposed ethical principles. The case of Kafka's practice in "Das Urteil" encourages me to propose the broad generalization that any element of a narrative is potentially available for the productive functions of the stubborn.[7]

Aesthetics and Ethics

As I turn toward my conclusion, the traffic of my discussion is ready to move back in the other direction and consider what the consequences of these conclusions are for our aesthetic judgments of "Das Urteil." Given what I've said so far, I realize that I have spoiled any possible surprise. The story is a remarkable aesthetic achievement, one whose speed, limited stubbornness, and consequent openness offer a strange and unsettling experience whose value is indisputable, even if—or because—it is not easy to pin down. To put this another way, "Das Urteil" is a formally innovative story that suggests new possibilities for storytelling itself. It is no wonder that Kafka regarded his composition of the story as marking a significant phase in his development as a writer. In addition, the story's formal innovation is productive precisely because it brings us face to face with, among other things, the uncanny elements of father-son relationships and the unsettling nature of guilt, love, and individual agency.

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[7] As these examples indicate, textual stubbornness is a feature available across genres and across works of different lengths. Although I believe, as my attention to narrative speed indicates, that the brevity of the short story form aids and abets the effectiveness of the stubbornness of "Das Urteil," I do not see any necessary general connection between brevity and stubbornness. Indeed, since stubbornness is textual recalcitrance that will not yield to our interpretive efforts and since reading always involves interpretation, stubbornness is potentially a feature of any text. But from an authorial perspective, the difference between constructing a textual recalcitrance that won't yield to interpretation and having that recalcitrance function to contribute to the power of one's design is huge.

Finally, I turn to consider the ethics of Kafka's telling. Despite Kafka's own troubled relationship with his father, Hermann, I cannot resist employing the metaphor of the father in talking about the kind of relationship he establishes with us. He is, happily, much more benevolent than Herr Bendemann, and he is also very trusting. Nevertheless, he also combines subtle guidance with distance and, at a key point, with less than full disclosure. In these ways, he creates himself as both a friendly and a formidable guide to his fictional world, one who is as interested in unsettling us as he is in guiding us. But it is also clear that he wants to unsettle us because he believes it will be for own good. I for one am willing to conclude that he's right.

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